

Sustainability management is about dealing with conflicts, also regarding chemical industries

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to this event. I appreciate being part of a SusChem Conference that is putting an apparently simple issue into the focus of sustainability: Realizing our sustainable future.

I

I suggest adding a question mark to the issue of your conference: Do we really already realize our sustainable future? Are we realizing the full extent of challenges and of opportunities that are ahead of us?

The motto of your conference reminds me of a famous saying of Ferdinand Lassalle that he used 150 years ago:

»Alle große politische Aktion besteht im Aussprechen dessen, was ist, und beginnt damit. Alle politische Kleingeisterei besteht in dem Verschweigen und bemänteln dessen, was ist.«

All major political action starts with the process of expressing and articulating what is. Lassalle said, every major action is basically made up this first step. And he added a next thought about what he called political “Kleingeisterei” that is a typical German expression which I did not find any translation into English. Translated into modern conference language he criticized silo thinking which lead us to a concealment and the habitude of glossing over reality.

With respect to our todays conference that means: Realising what situation we are in and speaking out on the challenges we are facing:

- This is exactly what it has to come down to. Basically, it is the starting point of fundamental change.
- And it is exactly what I doubt we are already doing alright.
- Two things cause my doubt and my concern:
 - My first concern is that politics, the scientific community and the private sector is not taken the sustainability strategy as serious as it needs to be taken.

Of course, the existing national strategy has also its deficits, vice versa. It is not as effective as it should be, it develops no binding power. Implementation is low key.

The question is: Can we do better? My pledge is to give it a try.

The Federal Government is now about to relaunch the national Sustainability Strategy.

The Federal Chancellery set up a process of consultation and public involvement that will lead to a final Cabinet decision in autumn this year – with hopefully more reliability.

- There is a second concern. This one is inwardly looking into the sustainability communities such as the one you are representing.

First the good news: I see quite a few sustainability communities popping up. Take e.g. the real estate industries, the green design movement, the corporate sustainability reporting community, the organic food community, climate change business groups, and last but not least some lifestyle groups increasingly promoting sustainability thinking. This is good.

Nevertheless, there is a “but”. These communities settle themselves comfortably under the umbrella of their reference groups. But I do not see much of integration and establishing a common frame.

Instead, I am afraid they all are more or less sticking to their audience. Without looking around and combining forces. It is quite uncommon to look for an overarching, integrated and jointly shared political focus – but this is exactly the core of what sustainability means.

I will give you an example for what I am talking about. I will talk about energy and chemistry: That is, about the carbon future, and in particular the future of coal and the task that I see arising for a sustainable chemistry, a task that is not yet understood and not yet fully accepted.

II

Today, on the sustainability agenda, the issue of energy and climate is the first and top issue. That is correct. Climate change victimized us all. Nobody can hide from it. Nobody can simply buy protection. Gro Harlem Brundtland, today the UN Special Envoy to the Secretary General of the UN for climate issues, recently put it like this: “It is irresponsible, reckless, and deeply immoral to question the real danger of climate change.”

Energy is the key issue. Meanwhile, this is widely accepted in our political thinking.

But most of the players predominantly stick to their single-silo policies featuring their respective part of the energy mix. There is no comprehensive sustainability approach. We do not have an integrated energy programme. I am afraid this is true for the traditional political thinking as well as for the renewable energy community, unfortunately.

I advocate an integrated approach towards energy, climate, industrial policies and global responsibility. Without this I do not see any option to meet the requirements of climate change in relation to equity, justice, security and freedom. Climate change puts our understanding of justice and democracy to test. The basic principle of democracy is equal rights to each citizen. Today, this also refers to global environmental resources.

More and more, people call this “carbon justice”. And this is really a challenge: Can we imagine our life, our cities, our mobility, our industry working with minus 60 percent CO₂ emissions? I have no doubts: We will have to get tuned to this question and we will have to face this challenge.

I know: This is a vision. Some people say: This is unrealistic. My argument is a very simple. In the history of mankind such far reaching visions have changed the world. Let me give you an example, which might be a comparison. The American Revolution started with the vision: “One man – one vote”. This vision was for a long period the guideline. In my country it took more than 100 years to bring this vision to reality; today it is regarded as a matter of course. But don’t forget: It took more than 100 years.

Regarding climate change we do not have 100 years to change the course of the world - due to the disastrous effects the climate change is likely to produce for those people that have the least options to mitigate or to adapt, we have to act faster. It is our obligation here in Germany to do more than other countries are doing.

With reference to a sustainable chemistry I see two major conflicts of interests where I think a more engaged chemistry community could make a difference. Please accept my apologies for not covering the whole agenda of SusChem. It would be my pleasure to extend my talk and to cover other highly interesting areas of your work. But due to time constraints I have to cut that short.

1. We need to build up renewable energies, faster and more ambitious than planned today.
 - This is by no means a simple task. On the contrary there are serious conflicts of interests involved. Take for example the biofuel. Biofuels can indeed be an option to replace oil. And there is no doubt: It is oil that we have to replace because, sooner or later, we will run out of oil. We have to develop alternatives now, because the oil age will long end before we burn the last drop of oil.
 - Bioenergy will have its share. But we must not create undesirable, potentially damaging social and ecological implications through a conflict of interest between climate goals and biodiversity.
 - Remember: Growth is always about choice. It is about quality, innovation and new solutions. Up until today, it is not yet understood nor implemented that dependence on finite resources and that environmental damage are anti-growth politics.
 - Remember Albert Einstein who told us: „You cannot solve the problem with the same thinking which created the problem.“
 - Bioenergy industries require innovation through sustainable chemistry.
 - I pledge for sustainable chemistry to create new solutions for the next generation of biofuels, faster und more efficient than what we have at hand now.

2. The second conflict I do see is about fossil energies.
- Some people are advocating the phasing out of coal power plants. They are trying to prevent the construction of any new coal fired power plants.
 - I strongly object. Look at China, look at the global scale, and you see that we are running into an energy gap without fossil energies. I think this is also true for Germany. Even with the most ambitious goals for renewables and for efficient use of energy there will be a gap if we stick to the phasing out of nuclear energy.
 - This is why we need to introduce technologies that are cleaning up coal and gas. We need a transition of the carbon economy from a pollutant to a clean economy. We have to make coal clean.
 - I am talking about carbon capture and storage (CCS). I am talking about capturing carbon dioxide and storing it instead of releasing it into the atmosphere.
 - I am convinced we could do it and we need to do it. For large emitters such as China, the US and India carbon capture and storage is a highly needed technological pathway into effective climate change mitigation. For Germany it is a technological challenge.
 - I am convinced: Technologically it is feasible. Costs of the commercial level of CCS-plants will be affordable, and there will be solutions to the environmental concerns. For Germany, CCS will turn out as a chance to show technological leadership.
 - But CCS is only at the beginning. With all sorts of serious questions and conflicts associated with storage, costs, and energy mix it is doubtful that Germany will really see a technological breakthrough. That is where sustainable chemistry comes in.
 - I would like to raise the question of how sustainable chemistry could possibly make a contribution to solve this conflict. The question at hand is:
 - Can we make captured CO₂ a resource instead of dealing with it as waste?
 - Can chemistry help us transforming the CCS from an end-of-the-pipe-technology into a recycling technology?

The EU has adopted ambitious targets in 2007 and last week they proposed an action-plan for the implementation of new measures. Indeed, we need more and stringent implementation. There is no deficit in goal setting, but there are deficits in implementation.

I advocate taking sustainability strategies serious. We need more fantasy. We need more courage and trust in order to experiment with sustainability strategies.

Sustainable chemistry is a key. No other technical principle combines economic and ecological issues as closely as chemical synthesis.

My question here is:

- Do we really recognize the chances for a national focus on catalyst research? I have put in a question mark here because the structures for sustainability research are still too primitive.
- Do we realize that a national sustainability strategy is more than a programmatic paper that all of a sudden drops out of the Berlin political machinery?
- Do we realize the advantages of industrial policies for Germany? There is no other country in Europe that levels with the German industrially relevant production systems.

III

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The last idea I want to share with you is about the concept of catalysts – a concept you all are aware of, of course. I will use it in a symbolic sense – in a cultural context.

The questions I raised a minute ago on the future of sustainability can not be answered with a bold and unrestricted “yes”. I think our society needs more learning and sharing of ideas in order to reply to these questions with a positive answer. It is necessary to build capacity for this learning-process.

Children learn in their families and in schools. Societies learn while they are coping with challenges and through actively solving conflicts.

In daily life we often call the way someone is acting a catalyst. People with special talents bring others together and ensure that progress and learning experiences are made.

In that sense: We need catalysts for sustainability strategies. In politics, nothing happens without catalysts whereas with catalysts the chemistry works.

Catalysts are protagonists of change.

Combining basic and applied research with the idea of passing on the scientific knowledge to the next generation – in this sense Wilhelm von Humboldt was a catalyst. In this sense, Sustainable Chemistry should play the role of a political catalyst.

For avoiding damages and mitigating emissions we have to apply systems of sustainability.

Keeping this in mind is a good point when we raise the big issues of a low carbon economy, of a chemical answer to the carbon dioxide and towards sustainability. And in that context we have to talk also about conflicts in realising our sustainable future.